



Casual But Substantial

CONTRIBUTED BY MIKE FARRELLY,
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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW WANDER

STATELY HOMES OF MONTCLAIR describes this house on Christopher Street (at the corner of Watchung Avenue) thusly: “This Mediterranean style villa fuses details of informal Italian construction with an American suburban program, casual but substantial”. It was built about 1913 for William Hance Gesell and his wife, Violet V. (Hoehn) Gesell. The Gesell clan moved en masse to Montclair in 1911. William’s brother, Richard, lived on Montclair Ave. William’s parents also lived on Montclair Ave., about half way between Richard’s house and William’s house on Christopher. It was an easy walk for them to either son’s house. William’s father, William Jacob Gesell, worked for Lehn & Fink, a New York based chemical and drug company. He often went abroad to arrange licensing agreements with European suppliers. Lehn & Fink re-packaged and distributed a wide variety of chemicals, including their most popular products: Lysol disinfectants and Pebico Toothpaste. Lehn & Fink was initially happy just to distribute these other products, but as demand grew, they felt it prudent to buy the manufacturers outright, just as they bought Lysol and Pebico. Pebico was the most popular brand of toothpaste in America until WWI made it difficult to get the ingredients and quality slipped, but it remained a reliable brand. William Hance (the son and the subject of this article) started as an engineer at Lehn & Fink. He oversaw the construction of their plant in Hoboken. After it was built he was made manager of the Hoboken operation. He supervised the construction of their plant in Bloomfield at 192 Bloomfield Avenue in 1920 and became the general manager of that operation. William Hance became VP of Lehn & Fink in 1931.

The Bloomfield plant kept on expanding until there were 7 buildings on the site by mid 1920s. They made Lysol and Pebico there until the complex was sold in 1964 (to the Sterling Drug Co.). In 1966 Sterling took over the whole company. The factories in Bloomfield were demolished to make way for an apartment complex. William’s brother Richard started his own chemical company: R. Gesell, Inc. based in the SOHO section of Manhattan. William and Violet’s son, William H. Jr., eventually became the president of his uncle’s company.

After William’s dad passed away and Richard moved to New York

to be closer to his business, William’s mom, Laura, moved to Watchung Ave., immediately around the corner from William and Violet’s house.

William and Violet sold the featured house in 1949 and moved into the house next to his mom on Watchung Ave. Although they no longer owned the featured house, the Gesells kind of surrounded it when William H. Jr. moved into a carriage house behind it. The 1890 map shows that the 2 houses mentioned above and the carriage house were part of Jacob Fessler’s farm. William and Violet bought a little piece of that farm to build the featured house. The Watchung Avenue

houses and the carriage house were never part of William and Violet’s property on Christopher Street.

George Barnum White and his wife May (Ryan) White bought the house in 1949. George and May had lived on Old Quarry Road in Cedar Grove at the south end of Mills Reservation. Although it was technically in Cedar Grove it was serviced by the Montclair Post Office, so the Whites considered themselves citizens of Montclair. May was a long time member of the St. Vincent’s Hospital Auxiliary. They raised money for and provided many services to the hospital (once on Elm St. - no longer in existence). May was elected president of the Auxiliary several times. George worked for various New York construction companies. He worked for the Empire Construction Company in the 1940s. He was president of the G.W. Rogers Construction Company in the 1970s. May passed away in 1952. George continued to live in this house until 1960 when he sold it and moved to Mountain Terrace with his sons: Michael and John.

The next owners were the Gages: Donald and Lila, who were both actors and musicians, deeply involved with local theater and musical organizations. Donald grew up in Vermont, but moved to Bloomfield when his dad took a job with the Edison Co. Donald entered the Cleveland Institute of Music when he was only 16. He then went abroad to study in France. He earned a degree in music (piano) at the University of Vermont in just 2.5 years. He taught music in Vermont and became the asst. conductor of the Vermont Symphony. Then he decided to study drama at the University of Michigan. With that under his belt, he became a leading man at the Paper Mill Playhouse in Milburn for 9 seasons. He ran a music school and several choral groups. He met Lila Capato when they were both performing at the Montclair Operetta Club.

It would be a mistake to think Donald was the only powerhouse in their marriage. Lila was an opera singer who studied voice in Italy. She also starred in popular musicals. She performed in Europe, at Radio City Music Hall, at Carnegie Hall and at Town Hall. She performed with the St. Louis Municipal Opera and appeared on TV several times. She often headlined at the Lake George Opera Festival where she appeared as Madame Butterfly in June of 1964 and as Carmen in July the same year. ■

If you’d like to see more images of Montclair homes, they are featured in the book, *Stately Homes of Montclair*, which can be found at Montclair Booksellers, several local libraries and the Stately Homes of Montclair Facebook page.